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Battle of Franklin

Fiercest and Bloodiest of the Entire War---Graphic Account By a Union General

Hillsboro (Ohio) Gazette.

One of the members of the local G. A. R. has furnished us with an account of the battle of Franklin which recently appeared in a Brooklyn paper, asking that we use it as many members of the 175th O. V. I. from this county were in this battle.

General Isaac R. Sherwood of Ohio, in his eulogy in the House of Representatives, on Sunday, May 12th, upon the late General George Washington Gordon, member from the Nashville (Tenn.,) district, gave this effective picture of the decisive battle of Franklin, Tenn. (November 30th, 1864,) in which both participated:

"Franklin was General Gordon's last battle and Franklin was the fiercest, the bloodiest and the most signal battle of the entire war. The war histories tell us more of Nashville, a two days' battle fifteen days later, but Nashville was a dress parade compared with Franklin. I was in the front in both battles. General Gordon was a Brigadier General in command of a brigade at Franklin, and he was abreast of the front line of bayonets in that mad, wild, desperate charge. He was wounded and captured on the Federal breastworks. In the books of war the place for a Brigadier General is in the center and rear of his brigade, but General Gordon was a chivalric knight with flaming sword leading that line of gleaming bayonets.

In Colonel Wilson J. Vance's war history I find the following paragraph on the Battle of Franklin:

There was greater loss, greater sacrifice, and more bloody fighting on the part of old Frank Cheatham's men on that beautiful Wednesday evening, November 30th, 1864, than took place on any field of the Crimean War. While 37 per cent. of Lord Cardigan's 673 men were killed or wounded in the memorable charge of the 600 at Balaklava, more than half of General Cleburne's and Brown's divisions were left dead or wounded in the fields and gardens of that little Tennessee town.

That brilliant Tennessee journalist and poet and historian' John Trotwood Moore, in his new book, entitled, "The Bishop of Cotton Town," gives a chapter on the Battle of Franklin. John Trotwood Moore was there. He was too young a half century ago for a soldier, but from a hill overlooking the lovely valley where the cold steel of the Blue and the Gray clashed for six terrible hours, he saw this historic conflict, the most desperate of all the centuries.

And of all the descriptions of that contest from the Confederate side his depiction is the most realistic and dramatic. Let me quote from John Trotwood Moore on the opening of the battle:

There stands today, as it stood then, in front of the town of Franklin, on the highest point of the ridge, a large linden tree, now showing the effects of age. It was half past three in the afternoon of November 30th, 1864, when General Hood rode unattended to that tree, threw the stump of the leg that was shot off at Chickamauga over the pommel of his saddle, drew out his field glass, and sat looking across the valley at the position of the enemy. It was the silence that always precedes a great battle. Presently the silence was broken by the soft strains of music which floated up from the town below. It was the Federal band playing "Just Before the Battle, Mother." The men in gray on the hill and the men in blue in the valley below listened. There were tears in many eyes, as the pathetic words were well remembered—

"Just before the battle, mother,
I am thinking most of you."

I was at Franklin, on the Union side, and I saw and heard it all from an advanced position near the center of the Federal line. I saw and heard it all—all that a soldier can see and hear amidst the glare, the thunderous roar, the stifling battle smoke, the yells of the victors, the agonizing groans of the wounded and dying. I remember the scene just before the battle, as described by John Trotwood Moore; I see it now as I saw it then—a lovely valley basking in the mellow glory of November sunshine. I see the little town of Franklin, quiet, yet restless, just inside the circle of the Federal lines. These lines extended from river to river. There were orchards and meadows and gardens and meandering brooks that shone in the sunlight like threads of silver. There were patches of woodland in the rich foliage of the autumn leaves, in scarlet, gold and green, tinged with the early frosts to gladden and glorify their fall.

What a pathetic picture to soothe the homesick heart of the tired soldier, sick of war and its ghastly carnage. Here was General Pat Cleburne, the soldier whose veteran brigade of stalwart veterans had, in the retreat from Chickamauga, checked the whole Federal Army at Ringgold. General Cleburne expressed a wish that should he die in battle it should be in this lovely valley. It was a prophetic wish, for only five hours later he and thirteen other general field officers yielded up their lives around the bloody battle lines of Franklin. I shall not attempt to tell of the awful struggle at Franklin, only to give some battle memories that came into my life on that terrible afternoon.

I was speaking of General Hood, the Commanding General, who sat on his horse under the linden tree taking a survey of the Federal lines. Suddenly he closed his field glasses, wheeled his horse, and rode back to General Stewart, with the command, "General, we will charge the Federal line of battle in front." Stewart formed his corps on the right. General Cheatham formed his corps on the left. A cannon on the ridge sounded the signal for the charge. With bayonets fixed, the heavy columns, all veterans, marched with a steady and even tread down the slope. The fiercest and bloodiest battle of the centuries was on. General Forrest's cavalry on the extreme right rested on the Harpeth River.

In 1874 a Southern soldier, who was in that battle line with General Cleburne, wrote a valuable article on this marvelous charge in the "Southern Magazine," then edited by General Basil Duke of Louisville.

I quote a paragraph:

"The hottest part of the line was a black thicket just at the right of the Columbia Pike."

This is correct. I was at that part of the line. I have a distinct recollection of that locust thicket, and I can see now, as I saw then, that waving line of shining bayonets as it rushed to the works with that defiant rebel yell, and the mad and murderous conflict that followed. On the left of my command the federal lines gave way. General Cleburne was abreast of that charging line. He fell just at the left of my regiment. John Trotwood Moore, in depicting this furious charge says:

As they rushed on the Federal line of battle a gray figure on a chestnut horse rode diagonally across the front of the charging column. The horse went down within fifty yards of the breastworks. The rider arose, waved his sword, and led his men on foot to the ramparts; then his brave form staggered and fell against the Federal line, pierced with rifle balls. His corps was swept back under a terrific fire of musketry, nearly one-half either killed or wounded.

A few yards on the Confederate right, General Gordon, who was also abreast of the charging line, fell, just under the fresh earth of the breastworks. He was wounded and captured as he refused to fall back. Near this spot General Adams also fell. He stood upon the parapet and was fatally shot, his horse falling across the breastworks. My old friend, General Jack Casement of Ohio, was commanding a Union brigade where General Adams fell. Deeply touched with his splendid courage, General Casement had cotton brought from the old ginhouse and placed under the dying soldier's head. "You are too brave a man to die," said Casement, "and I wish I could save you." General Carter fell mortally wounded before reaching the Federal battle line. General Stahl reached the ditch; he stood on the bodies of the dead and gave commands and rallied his men.

Not a hundred yards away lay General Granbury, dead. He died leading the brave Texans to the works. A minute more and General Carter and General Stahl were both mortally wounded. Twelve Confederate generals were either dead or wounded; colonels were commanding divisions, captains were commanding brigades. More generals were killed in that six hours struggle in front of that little Tennessee town there were killed in the two days' fight at Chickamauga, or the three days's fight at Gettysburg, where three times as many soldiers were in the hell of the battle.

The struggle closed at midnight—wrote General Hood—when the enemy, under orders, fell back on Nashville.

There were 47 Union dead, besides the wounded, in the little front yard of the Carter House alone, and they lay around the breast works from river to river. Outside the breastworks in a wider line from river to river—awider and thicker line—lay the Confederate dead. Amid the smoke and grime of battle, and under the dun clouds of battle smoke almost hiding the stars, the Blue and the Gray lines looked the same. I stood upon the parapet just before midnight and saw all that could be seen. I saw and heard all that my eyes could see, or my rent soul could contemplate in such an awful environment.

It was a spectacle to appall the stoutest heart. A Nashville poet wrote:

Ten thousand men, when the warefare was o'er,
Lay on the battlefield crimsoned in gore.

The wounded, shivered in the chill November air; the heart-rending cries of the desperately wounded, and the prayers of the dying, filled me with an anguish that no language can describe.

From that hour to this I have hated war. I was colonel, commanding the 111th Ohio, just to the right of the old cotton gin, and just in front of that grove of locusts, described by General Trotwood Moore. Early in the fight Colonel Lowrey of the 107th Illinois, was killed, which left me the ranking officer of tee battle line of the brigade, which I commanded to the end of the battle.

The well known war correspondent Loomis, "writing" of this battlefield, said:

"I have seen many battlefields, but never saw evidences of so terrible a conflict as I saw in front of the position of the One Hundred and Eleventh Ohio Infantry. I counted twelve locust trees in a cluster, that were almost shot off with musket balls. How men could be prevailed upon to charge and recharge against such a wall of fire I cannot understand."

The Nashville Times of December 3d, three days after the battle, printed the following editorial:

"The One Hundred and Eleventh Ohio Infantry, Colonel Sherwood commanding, was exposed to the shock of the fierce charges at Franklin and stood firm with signal valor. Its losses were very severe. Of its officers Lieutenants Bennett and Curtis were killed; Major McCord was severely wounded; Captains Southworth and Dowling were very severely wounded; also, Lieutenants Baker, Beery and Kistigh."

In officers and men my regiment suffered more fatalities than any regiment in the Union Army. Franklin was General George W. Gordon's last battle. It was his last of over thirty battles, and in every one he was always at the front.

As a soldier General Gordon was the peer of any officer who wore the gray or who ever drew a sword along a battle line.

As a bronzed and grizzled old soldier who fought on the other side, I esteem it an honor to be called upon today to pay my humble tribute to General George W. Gordon of heroic memory. None knew him well but to love him; none knew his record of civic achievements but to praise. In the beautiful cemetery at Memphis all that is mortal of our honored friend sleeps well. Every recurring year with the birth of the glowing May gentle hands will scatter the choicest flowers over his grave in grateful recognition of his wholesome Christian life and in honor of his name and fame. And above the green sod where our hero sleeps the snowy magnolia will suffuse a sweeter balm and the wild passion flower winding its sweet tendrils above the waving grasses will gather tears beneath the stars and shed them in the sunlight.

Mason county poured her libation of blood upon the altars of war, and nowhere did the crimson sacrifice flow more freely than on Franklin's awful field. The old Sixteenth Kentucky was in the thick of the fray and Company G, commanded by the late Captain David L. Wells did heroic service and left it full quota of dead and dying and wounded to enrich the martial story and add to the carnage.